

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Published: November 14, 2011

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Chesterfield-based AdvanceTEC focus is on cleanrooms

By JOAN TUPPONCE

Staying focused on designing and building cleanrooms is a key focus for AdvanceTEC.

"We keep it simple but do the basics really well," said Bryan Phelan, one of the company's owners.

The Chesterfield County-based company designs and builds cleanrooms for nanotechnology, semiconductor, pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries. The cleanrooms filter and control particles in the air as well as temperature, pressure and relative humidity, all of which could disrupt research and development or production.

Founder John Burton started the high-tech general contracting firm in 2000 after working for Performance Contracting Inc., which designed cleanrooms for what eventually became the Qimonda computer memory-chip manufacturing plant in eastern Henrico County. The plant opened in 1998 but closed in 2009.

When AdvanceTEC first started, it focused solely on semiconductor and nanotechnology projects across the mid-Atlantic. In 2005 when the semiconductor business was moving offshore, it began serving the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries as well.

"Those markets were being underserved," Phelan said. "It was a natural fit to backfill with pharmaceutical and biotechnology projects."

Joe McMahon, president and CEO of North Carolina-based KBI Biopharma, a biopharmaceutical contract development and manufacturing business, said he is impressed with AdvanceTEC's performance.

"We do work for some of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world, and their standards are very high," he said. "We have been able to attract business very easily with the work AdvanceTEC has done."

AdvanceTEC's territory covers the eastern half of the U.S., but most of its clients are located between New Jersey and Florida.

"That's a strong market for us," said Phelan, who became managing partner in 2009, two years after joining the firm. "We do some work in Virginia, but most of our work is outside of Virginia."

Clients include leading technology companies such as Merck & Co. and Dow Corning as well as universities including Duke, Penn State, Georgia Tech and Purdue. Its clients also include government labs such as the U.S. Naval Research Lab in Washington and Jefferson Lab in Newport News.

The majority of the company's business is generated through repeat clients and referrals.

"We listen to our clients," Phelan said. "We are transparent with information. We don't hide anything from our clients. That is why we get so many repeat customers."

The company has been able to ride out the last three years and grow in terms of revenue and profitability. From 2010 to 2011, revenues grew 40 percent.

AdvanceTEC was listed on the Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing companies in 2007, 2008 and 2010. Its workforce also has grown. It had 20 employees two years ago and now has 28.

"The quality of our people is a differentiating factor for us," Phelan said.

In 2011, the firm added two key employees to the ownership team — Koray Ozgenc, who serves as director of field operations, and Glenn Wakefield, director of internal operations.

Jim Carter, manager of operations for Semprius Inc., a developer and manufacturer of solar modules in Durham, N.C., has AdvanceTEC designing and constructing a semiconductor fabrication cleanroom and module assembly lines for his company.

"Although they are a small-to-midsized company, they are extremely talented," he said. "They are small enough to be agile and responsive. They are balanced in their approach. They are aggressive in terms of commitment but allow us to understand the process as we go."

Duke University Project Manager Myron Taschuk refers to AdvanceTEC as a team player.

"They had to work with the architects and consulting engineers and be pretty diplomatic about it, redesigning what was already drawn," he said. "They brought in a lot of construction and design expertise. They changed the design and saved us a lot of money."